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## Sounding queer collaborative acts: Chantal Akerman films Sonia Wieder-Atherton

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### Abstract

The cellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton has collaborated with Chantal Akerman on her feature films, shorts, documentaries and installations. However, Wieder-Atherton's influence on Akerman's filmmaking, and her physical presence in the films themselves, have not been examined directly by scholars. This article will address this imbalance by outlining their collaborative project, before analysing Akerman's short film *Trois Strophes sur le nom de Sacher* (1989), in which the cellist performs the eponymous composition by Henri Dutilleux. Through the inter-filmic presence of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) and the allusions to Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), I argue that the cellist's intense rendering of Dutilleux's score, marked by his use of *scordatura*, catalyses Akerman's queer mistuning of Hitchcock's classic. In doing so, her film produces a form of ambivalent spectatorship that embraces what I am calling the 'musically queer'. My analysis draws on Tania Modleski's critical swerve away from the male gaze in her study of *Rear Window*, and on Lee Edelman's conceptualisation of *Rear Window*'s rumbling pulse of anal eroticism. I will demonstrate how Akerman charges the 'rear view' backdrop of her film with an immersive sonic erotics that decentres the phallocentric scopic regime and fashions an acoustic space for queer spectatorial pleasures.

### Keywords

Short film, Music, Gender and sexuality, Spectatorship, Lesbian desire, *Rear Window*

When Chantal Akerman films the cellist and composer Sonia Wieder-Atherton an affective encounter occurs that moves spectators through colourful explosions of tenderness, yearning, violence and passion. A relational process takes place through the entwined worlds of music and cinema, shaped by the intermingled lives of two artists. It is clear that Wieder-Atherton's sensitivity to the resonance of sound, to sonic colour, to the magic of silence and the fluid shaping of phrases, has the potential to coexist with cinematic expression. The way she conceptualises her music-making practice moves in time with Akerman's formal sensitivities as a filmmaker. Soon after meeting Akerman, to whom she was introduced by the actress Delphine Seyrig in 1983, Wieder-Atherton became the filmmaker's trusted collaborator and intimate life partner, and her musical presence in Akerman's cinema, defined by the opacity of her musical voice, imbues the filmmaker's soundtracks, images and installations with an acoustic energy that defies resolution or closure.<sup>1</sup> This article will offer an analysis of one of Akerman's 'minor' films that features the cellist, but has not yet received direct attention from critics, namely, the 12-minute short *Trois Strophes sur le nom de Sacher/Three Stanzas on the Name Sacher* (1989), in which Wieder-Atherton performs the eponymous composition by Henri Dutilleux.

In *Trois Strophes*, Akerman's camera devotedly captures the musician's bodily gestures and facial expressions, including her muscular strength, and her intuitive responsiveness to her instrument's sound. The relational process of listening and the materiality of musical performance, expressed via the cellist's bodily exertion, is encapsulated in Marcel Cobussen's description of affect. He writes: 'the sound of music grips the body, enters the body, solicits the body's participation, the corporeal consent, the e-motion. Sound has the capacity to modulate the physical, affective and libidinal dynamics of the body', constituting 'a force of contact that has the seductive power to affect the body, the skin, the brain' (2012, 105). Through being subjected to the cellist's music while being compelled to respond to its affective power, the spectator is forced to acknowledge the emergence of new sensuous relations. As Cobussen affirms, 'the subject cannot *not* respond; she cannot *not* participate – that is, assume a relationship' (105). We can discern in this statement, and in Akerman's filming of the cellist's performance, vestiges of a deep-seated need, that is necessarily repressed, for the kind of reciprocity, responsive communication and free-flowing dialogue that Griselda Pollock has identified in Akerman's later 2004 installation *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide/ To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Fridge*.

In this installation, Akerman sets in motion a cathartic process of translation and verbalization by asking her mother to read aloud a handwritten passage from her own mother's diary (that of Akerman's maternal grandmother), prior to her harrowing murder in Auschwitz in 1942. Pollock considers this to be a pivotal moment in Akerman's oeuvre that marks the beginning of talking (and open listening) between mother and daughter: the silent gesture of Natalia's tears, her gentle caress and kiss of her daughter's cheek, constitute 'a response that returns to gesture as the movement towards, but also with and beside, another, and returns to the touch, to a moment of affect and contact that does not dissolve difference but marks a shared moment and creates a surface of meeting, a space of connection' (2013, 337).<sup>2</sup> As Pollock stresses, Akerman is the recipient, not the initiator, of this gesture. One could say that she is in the position of the listener, affected by the intensities of physical contact rather than actively looking. The receptive posture of listening is activated in *Trois Strophes*, where it frees 'the *relational* subject' (cited in Cobussen and Nielsen 2012: 114), allowing a form of communication to take place that enables a *queer* space of connection to materialise.

### **A limitless collaborative adventure**

The female-centred collaborative beginning between Akerman and Wieder-Atherton, alongside the cellist's sister Claire Atherton, and graced by the presence of their mother, Ioana Wieder, is suitably spotlighted by the soundtrack (a continually marginalised element of cinematic experience) of Akerman's rarely screened *Letters Home* (1986), starring Delphine Seyrig, a close childhood friend of Ioana.<sup>3</sup> Unusually, the soundtrack was jointly composed by the director herself and Claire Atherton, who became Akerman's longstanding editor (Atherton is the sole name listed under 'montage', marking the start of their thirty-year-long collaboration). The soundtrack features a 'Berceuse allemande', sung by Ioana Wieder, and a 'Berceuse américaine' (aka 'Hot Cross Buns') sung by Sonia and Claire, whose sisterly duet accompanies the opening credits.<sup>4</sup>

The cellist's collaboration with Akerman officially commenced three years earlier with *Les Années 80/The Eighties* (1983), described by the filmmaker as a test-run for her 1986 musical comedy *Golden Eighties* (Percival 2019, 198). In the latter film, in which the cellist's name appears in the closing credits, she plays the soft accompaniment to the solo 'Cette nuit', sung by Jeanne (a Polish-Jewish Holocaust survivor played by Seyrig), thus providing the musical support for the melancholic expression of female longing and desire. Two shorts from the same year that feature Wieder-Atherton in a visible as well as an auditory capacity, alongside Akerman, are *Rue Mallet-Stevens* (1986), in which the cellist performs music by Henri Dutilleux, and *Portrait d'une paresseuse/Sloth* (1986) that shows the cellist barefoot and dressed in a T-shirt as she practises her cello, while Akerman contemplates getting out of bed (Percival 2019, 200). Several years later Akerman made *Trois Strophes sur le nom de Sacher*, another short in which Wieder-Atherton takes centre-stage and performs three pieces (three 'stanzas') by Dutilleux that were commissioned to celebrate the seventieth birthday of the Swiss conductor Paul Sacher.<sup>5</sup> The cellist recounts in an interview that Dutilleux attended the shoot and was mesmerised by the experience of witnessing the filmmaking process unfold (Wieder-Atherton 2016).

Two later collaborations were *Histoires d'Amérique: Food, Family and Philosophy/American Stories: Food, Family and Philosophy* (1988), 'an ethnic serial portrait' (Marguiles 1996, 194) concerned with Jewish culture, tradition and collective memory, and the experimental documentary *D'Est/From the East* (1993). The recent publication of Sandra Percival's conversations with the cellist reveal the extent to which Akerman's images, stories and movements in the former film inflected the rhythm of the music she performed: Wieder-Atherton recorded the songs 'while watching the images and hearing the voices of the actors' (2019, 202). For *D'Est*, Wieder-Atherton notes that 'the overlays of music were more like adding a color' to the existing sounds (2019, 204). At the end of the film is a lengthy concert-hall performance given by the cellist's real-life teacher Natalia Shakhovskaya. In a public concert at the Moscow Conservatory, Shakhovskaya is filmed performing an aria by Boris Tchaikovsky. Interestingly, the textural qualities in the *mise-en-scène* of the earlier short *Trois Strophes*, anticipate this sequence in *D'Est*. The folds in the curtains and the sumptuous gown of Wieder-Atherton are echoed by the vertical organ pipes and by Shakhovskaya's luxurious dress. In this way, through the expressive power of montage, Akerman affectionately forges a relation between the documentary and the short, and between mentor and pupil. Wieder-Atherton also features in a non-diegetic capacity in Akerman's later installation *D'Est: au bord de la fiction/From the East: Bordering on Fiction* (1995). Here her performance of the 'Kol Nidre' accompanies Akerman's readings in Hebrew and English that emanate from a small television set placed on the floor in the final room. The cellist went on to feature in Akerman's musicscape *À l'Est avec Sonia Wieder-Atherton/In the East with Sonia Wieder-Atherton* (2009), shot live in a radio studio in Warsaw, accompanied by the Sinfonia Varsovia Orchestra. She also arranged the music for the live performance *D'Est en musique/D'Est in Music* (2005), which comprises excerpts from *D'Est* projected onto a black tulle veil. In front of the veil, Wieder-Atherton appears as a spectral presence alongside the pianist Laurent Cabasso and as they play, the musicians magically merge with the film's images.

In addition to composing the music for the comedy *Un divan à New York/A Couch in New York* (1996), for which she acted as Musical Director, Wieder-Atherton conceived the music for *Nuit et jour/Night and Day* (1991) and composed and performed pieces for the soundtrack of *Demain on déménage/Tomorrow we Move* (2004). She also makes an aural

appearance in *La Captive/The Captive* (2000), Akerman's loose adaptation of Proust's *La Prisonnière* (1923). When Simon summons Ariane to his bedroom, Ariane suggests they listen to some music, and Simon selects a recording (using a remote control) of Schubert's *Arpeggione Sonata*, played by Wieder-Atherton. The cellist, who remains unseen and unacknowledged until the closing credits, is acoustically present in the room with the couple. The recording of Wieder-Atherton's playing, suitably controlled by Simon, is made to participate in the homoerotic subtext associated with music, sexual freedom and Ariane's suspected lesbian encounters. The Schubert recording surreptitiously responds to Ariane's desire for music and her unconfirmed desire for other women, haunting the later balcony duet between Ariane and an unnamed woman, whose bodies are physically separated, while their voices pleasurably fuse. The evident link between music, female creativity and female intimacy arises again, in a non-erotic mode, in the documentary *De l'autre côté/From the Other Side* (2002), for which Wieder-Atherton arranged Monteverdi's 'Duo Seraphim' for two cellos and performed the piece with Shakhovskaya.

More recently, Akerman asked Wieder-Atherton to participate in her 2013 installation *Maniac Shadows* at its first presentation in New York, inviting her to give a live performance of her contemporaneous dreamscape *Odyssey for Cello and Imaginary Choir*, for which the cellist constructed 'a scenario of sound', using sources from soundtracks of films by Pasolini, Rossellini and Akerman, as well as sounds from real-life scenes and sound libraries (Percival 2019, 210). After Akerman's suicide in 2015, Wieder-Atherton was asked by the curators of 'Chantal Akerman: *Maniac Shadows*' at La Ferme du Buisson in Paris, to 'inhabit' the exhibition with her cello, giving short recitals for visitors in the gallery. From the time they met, in 1983, until Akerman's untimely death, the lives of both artists overlapped and intermingled: as the cellist practised, the filmmaker slept and later awoke to the sounds of her cello. Wieder-Atherton poignantly observes, '[o]ur universes were communicating all the time, like an uninterrupted movement of sounds, texts, images, and ideas' (Percival 2019, 211), a movement that has not ceased, transcending the finality of death.

### **Musically queer: sounding a 'lesbian minor cinema'**

The conspicuous absence of critical studies of Wieder-Atherton's presence in Akerman's cinema (whether as a filmed performer who features centrally, or as a diegetic or extra-diegetic presence on the soundtrack) is not surprising in view of the commonplace privileging of sight over sound in critical and theoretical scholarship. Salomé Voegelin expresses this perfectly when she asserts:

To write about sound and sound art, a sounding art, is to write about the formless, the predicative, that which invisibly does what we think we see but which struggles to find a place in articulation, while what we think we see slides effortlessly into language in the certain shape of the noun. (2017, 61)

Sound exposes the limitations of linguistic expression when it attempts to capture affective experience. Voegelin's statement about sound resonates with the reticence and implosive energy that surges through Akerman's restless audio-visual creations, which refuse categorisation. If the sonic life of Akerman's cinema often slips between the cracks of critical discourse, on a basic level it can be said to combine an entrancing, if contradictory, mixture

of ‘tiny sounds’ (half-heard, barely audible sounds), thus termed by Ian Biddle (2013), and more spectacular visual scenes of diegetic music and dance.

One likely reason for the paucity of scholarship on Wieder-Atherton’s collaborations with Akerman is that she features visibly in only a select number of esoteric shorts and films for television that have not received the distribution, acclaim or generated the level of interest matching the feature-length films. The ‘invisibility’ of Wieder-Atherton in a scholarly context is no doubt compounded by the filmmaker’s reluctance in her autobiographical works, and in conversations around them, to explicitly refer to the musician as her long-term partner, which would give her a less ambiguous and more locatable, visible presence. Alisa Lebow draws attention to this issue when she questions Akerman’s tendency to leave ‘any direct references to her girlfriend of decades, Sonia Wieder-Atherton, out of nearly all of her autobiographical representations’, even though the sounds of her cello are usually present on the soundtrack (2008, 111). However, it must be reiterated that the cellist’s *audibility* in Akerman’s oeuvre is there for all to hear but it tends to pass without detailed comment from critics.

In her fascinating chapter on queer and Jewish visibility, Lebow explores ambivalence as a trope in a selection of first-person films by queer Jewish filmmakers, including Akerman’s self-portrait *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman/ Chantal Akerman by Chantal Akerman* (1997). Lebow poses crucial questions concerning the uneasy coexistence of Jewishness and queerness in these films that seem to privilege indefinability, the ambivalence of self-representation, and, in some instances, the sonic over the visual. She examines each director’s self-positioning in relation to dominant visibility politics, and their need to avoid damaging stereotypes (for example, the hypersexual Jew) and ‘pernicious pathologizing discourses’ that have remained in use (2008, 112; 148).

Significantly, the second part of *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* is composed of excerpts from other of her films, including her ‘not-quite coming-out story’ (White 2008, 417) *Portrait d’une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles/Portrait of a Young Girl at the end of the 1960s in Brussels* (1993) and *Histoires d’Amérique*. Lebow observes that curiously, the funniest Jewish jokes from this latter film do not feature in the excerpts Akerman chose to include in her self-portrait. The director selects the less amusing anecdotes, which, Lebow suggests, encourages spectators to ‘refer back to the earlier, more complete, and “authentic” work for the necessary resonances’ (2008, 125), just as we are required to do with the faint evocations of Akerman’s 1970s films in *Trois Strophes*. Whilst this directorial choice could be perceived as regressive, fostering watered-down glimpses of Akerman’s former radical tactics, I am inclined to read these elliptical references, that pervade many of her films and installations, as a deliberate subversion of the causal relation of original to copy, in a countercultural, Warholian rejection of the politics of authenticity and the hard binaries of original/copy, natural/artificial and masculine/feminine.

Yet Lebow’s analysis adds further nuance to this reading when she points out that the ‘traditional Jewish state of being represented in Akerman’s self-portrait is, after all, that of memory and displacement’, which are key tropes in the director’s ‘own contemporary sense of her Jewishness’ (2008, 124–5). The Jewish parable read aloud by Akerman at the start of *Histoires d’Amérique* (cited in the self-portrait), expresses her break with tradition through her childless status as a nonprocreative Jewish woman. Lebow thus surmises that ‘she paradoxically represents both a link to and a rupture with Judaism’, while letting slip a

measure of regret and anxiety regarding 'the potential rupture that homosexuality (signalled through childlessness) poses to the continuity of Jewish traditions' (125).<sup>6</sup> Whilst I agree that these intersecting aspects of Akerman's identity play out in vital ways across her multifarious corpus, demanding a more attuned response from critics, we must also keep in mind the degree to which displacement functions as a potent poetic trope that reinforces the queer dynamic of slippage. It functions to foreclose reductive explanations and to dispel the causal logic of heteronormativity, which, I will argue, is replaced in *Trois Strophes* by the creation of a kaleidoscopic cinematic experience, composed of haunting inter-filmic presences that produce what I am calling the *musically queer*. The musically queer fashions an acoustic space for queer spectatorial pleasures and supports a subversive mode of ambivalent spectatorship.

B. Ruby Rich notes that *Portrait d'une jeune fille* helped to define 'a pre-queer cinema as well as a new way of making cinema', alongside films by Jean Cocteau and Jean Genet, two other pioneering figures in early histories of lesbian and gay cinema in France (2013, 214). Patricia White describes *Portrait d'une jeune fille*, that presents a complex portrait of lesbian desire, as a remake of sorts, of the filmmaker's earlier short *Saute ma ville/Blow up My Town* (1968) that stars an 18-year-old Akerman, and of *Je tu il elle/I... You... He... She...* (1974), her 'structurally restrained yet emotionally chaotic representation of adolescent lesbian passion' (2008, 416). White connects the reticence of Akerman's filmic representations of the marginal status of lesbian desire, to the filmmaker's 'embrace of the minor' that 'traces a route through identity politics' (415). By 'minor', she is referring to Akerman's minimalist aesthetic that resists conventional formats and demonstrates an investment in 'reduced means' as a mode of 'inscribing desire', enabling her to carve out 'a lesbian authorial persona' across her extensive range of audio-visual creations (412–4). White's understanding of reduced means encompasses short and low-budget films, films with sparse narratives and sets, and low-key commissions for television.

White's conception of 'minor' dually refers to Akerman's interest in the figure of 'the juvenile'. Her third iteration of 'girlhood', in *Portrait d'une jeune fille*, illustrates, for White, the director's commitment to 'the "minor" as an open-ended, unfinished state' (2008, 416), signalling also a fluidity that disturbs notions of lineage, inheritance and the oppressive patriarchal authority associated with an original source. Akerman's cinema continually refuses to comply with a normative vision of queer identity, just as it refuses to acquiesce to the confessional and affirmative coming-out narrative that is dependent on acceptance from heteronormative society. White applies the category of 'lesbian minor cinema' to a selection of singular, filmic representations of lesbian desire. The term deliberately combines the negative, gendered connotations of 'minor' (the trivialised, the substandard, the underfunded), with the gendered sexuality and subjectivity signified by 'lesbian' (413–4).

I think this term can usefully be applied to *Trois Strophes*, an overlooked (and underheard) short film whose queer mistuning of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) exposes the sullied undertones of a classic of pure cinema, by one of her favourite male auteurs.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, in all its singularity, sparseness and subversive discretion, this short film showcases a Jewish, Belgian, lesbian director filming her same-sex partner, while fashioning a unique acoustic space for queer spectatorial pleasures. In taking small steps to undo the critical silence around Wieder-Atherton's role in Akerman's oeuvre, by bringing the cellist's presence into the realm of critical audibility, I hope to reveal how musical sound comes to function as one of several interlinked cultural signifiers of otherness that find

expression in the overlapping relational and desirous acts of music-making and queer cinematic storytelling.

### **A scandalous scene: *Trois Strophes sur le nom de Sacher***

The scenario of *Trois Strophes*, presented by Akerman to Wieder-Atherton, is as follows: 'Imagine que tu rentres chez toi après une soirée, tu ne te changes pas, juste tu poses ton manteau, et tu joues, comme si la soirée continuait, mais avec toi seule qui l'imagines.' (Akerman 2011).<sup>8</sup> This film is devoid of dialogue, dominated instead by the sound and sight of the cellist who puts down her coat and keys and begins to play. The *mise-en-scène* resembles a theatre stage-cum-studio apartment-cum-home cinema with furniture visible. The blue-black colouring, the mechanical play of light, the blood red curtains and creeping camera movements create a fantasy world but one underpinned by the hallmarks of horror. In the music, we hear a concoction of scratchy and luminous harmonics, erratic pizzicatos and unsettling tremolos. Framed by the red curtains, the side of an apartment block is visible, containing two large windows, through which three figures can be seen – two women and a man – suggestive of a love triangle (female-male-female) that unusually privileges the female axis. The figures move gracefully around and between the two rooms, as if acting out the musician's mental imaginings.

The trio silently perform everyday domestic tasks: they pour coffee, iron, clean their teeth, brush their hair, shave and smoke, and their balletic movements are timed to occasionally coincide with the cellist's physical gestures. The force of Wieder-Atherton's playing thus musicalises Akerman's cinematic poetry of the everyday. In contrast to the technique of rear projection, the soundless visual background action is not merely secondary to the foreground action, but it is designed to be seen. Whilst the *mise en abyme* effect is jarring, the congruence of specific gestures performed by the female figures and the musician creates spatial continuity between foreground and background, bringing the women into closer proximity to each other. The background performance resembles a silent film accompanied by a solo musician, while the audience is left to piece together the story. It also resembles a creepy dolls house, inhabited by figurines whose daily life unfolds in an uncanny state of calmness, pierced by soft eruptions of violence. Akerman asked dancers, not actors, to play the three figures, raising the possibility that the apartment is haunted by the ghost of her feminist masterpiece *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), a film she described as 'totally choreographed' (Adams 2010).<sup>9</sup>

Images of imprisonment that arise in other of Akerman's films are visible in *Trois Strophes*: the dancers convey the idea of being trapped inside a confined structure, at the mercy of the music's whims, while the cellist dreams up a make-believe world with her instrument, arising from her impassioned dialogue with Dutilleux's score. Chillingly, behind the 'rear window' construction, the small light-yellow tiles lining the walls of the left-hand room are imitations of those that can be seen in Jeanne Dielman's kitchen. As Marion Schmid (2014) argues, the prison metaphor constitutes a sort of haunting 'primal scene' in Akerman's oeuvre that tends to allude to the experiences of Akerman's mother, Natalia Akerman, who survived deportation and internment in Auschwitz.<sup>10</sup> In *Trois Strophes* this visual evocation of imprisonment is offset by other visual signs of domestic disorder (the messy pink bed sheets), increasing tension and a general feeling of something unravelling.



In the final long take of *Jeanne Dielman*, after stabbing her client in the neck, Jeanne is filmed sitting at her table with blood on her hands and white shirt. She is unable to stifle several deep breaths that rise up through her belly and chest, forcing her body to remain open in the aftermath of the symbolic death of her former self, catalysed by the devastating pleasure of orgasm. The pivotal moment of killing is echoed in the choreographed backdrop of *Trois Strophes*. When the cellist reaches an insistent, high-pitched passage in the music, one of the women in the background swings her arm around and down, as if plunging a knife into something, a gesture that silently disrupts the norms of domesticity (see Figure 1). The female figure then turns to the mirror and brushes her hair slowly.<sup>11</sup>

<INSERT FIGURE 1>

Figure 1: Behind the back right-hand window, the dancer violently swings her arm around and down (Mallia Films, La Sept, ARCanal, Centre Pompidou).

These frightening, stylised moments function as faint citations of Jeanne Dielman's repetitive gestures and her shocking act of killing. The flickering blue light that illuminates the glass cabinet behind Jeanne as she sits, suggests that a police car or ambulance is waiting outside. The blue shimmers, the red blood on her hands and the lilting, murky rumbles of traffic noise, re-emerge at the start of *Trois Strophes* in the form of the bright red curtains, the flickers of blue light, and similar ambient rumbles that accompany the opening and closing credits. The parallels being drawn with the ending of *Jeanne Dielman* suggest that we are perhaps being confronted with a crime scene.

### **The queer mistuning of Hitchcock's *Rear Window***

*Trois Strophes* is filled with music, countering the silence of Jeanne Dielman's world that leaves no place for music, as Akerman has inferred (Lambert 2015). Dutilleux's score includes a special six-note motif, corresponding to the six letters of the name SACHER in German notation, in homage to the eponymous conductor. The first 'stanza' also includes a quotation from Béla Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*. These encoded references recall Franz Waxman's theme song 'Lisa' in *Rear Window*. The song shares its name with the female lead Lisa (Grace Kelly), who is transfixed by its beautiful melody as it floats through the windows of the songwriter's apartment, penetrating the lives of the surrounding community and saving the life of the suicidal woman Miss Lonely-Hearts. Miss Lonely-Hearts is an isolated character who invites imaginary friends to dinner, narrowly escapes rape, and succumbs to despair when she prepares herself a glass of water and a fatal quantity of red pills. However, she changes her mind after hearing the songwriter's work-in-progress, 'Lisa'. Music's affective power offers her protection and hope. It enables her to reconnect with the world, just as the 'socialising force of sound' (Gottlieb 2017, 52) lifts the songwriter, a middle-aged man who lives alone, out of his solitude. In the closing moments, community wins out over loneliness, as the pair appear together in the songwriter's apartment, listening to the finished record.

One of the notable features of Dutilleux's score is his unusual use of *scordatura*, which involves a mistuning of the cello's open strings. He wanted to draw out the 'fine, warm, deep colour' of the bottom register by tuning down the two lowest strings, from C to Bb and G to F#. The transgressive quality of the mistuned strings that expand the pitch range of the music,

allows for experimentation with the sonic extremities of the instrument, with the cello's voice being pushed beyond its normal limits, sounding 'in excess of musical normality' (Voegelin 2017, 67). Turning to Susan McClary's study of excess and the framing of female voices that 'subvert musical codes through sonic excess and irrationality', Voegelin explores the 'disobedient' voice of a sounding art. She compares this deviant voice to overlooked female voices in music history that deviate from musical normality and reason and are classified as 'insane and immoral next to what sounds properly in relation to a (visual, masculine) musical language' (2017, 67). When thinking of Akerman's reworking of the visual, masculine musical language of Hitchcock's film, this form of gendered deviance, cited by Voegelin, could be applied to the wild harmonies of Wieder-Atherton's sensuous shaping of Dutilleux's non-normative scoring.

Akerman performs a decisive gender reversal of *Rear Window* in *Trois Strophes*: the camera is positioned in the room with the musician rather than in the apartment opposite. The spectator is not aligned with the voyeuristic male gaze, mirroring the spectatorial position of Hitchcock's male hero, L. B. Jeffries (aka Jeff, played by James Stewart), the photojournalist, immobilised with a broken leg, who observes the songwriter from his own apartment. Instead, Akerman associates herself, through the position of her camera, with Hitchcock when he makes his cameo appearance. Indeed, in *Rear Window* the director is spotted winding the mantelpiece clock in the songwriter's front room (manipulating time, echoing the work of the musician), and he utters some words to the songwriter, possibly advising him which notes to play, likening his role as director to that of composer (Fawell 2001, 101) (see Figure 2). Mirroring Lisa's transgressive mobility in *Rear Window* that sees her make the dangerous crossing into the apartment of the domestic abuser and killer, Lars Thorwald, Akerman performs a courageous spatial reversal that sees the spectator of *Trois Strophes* aligned with the queer gaze of the female director as she films her friend, lover and musical collaborator from within the fictional space of the musician's bedroom. This manoeuvre simultaneously enables Akerman to validate the relational act of listening over the primacy of sight, thus pushing Hitchcock's 'case study of audieurs as well as voyeurs' one step further (Gottlieb 2017, 51).

<INSERT FIGURE 2>

Figure 2: Hitchcock appears in the songwriter's front room in *Rear Window*, adjusting the mantelpiece clock as he plays (Universal Pictures).

The intensity and physicality of Wieder-Atherton's performance, caressed by Akerman's camera, feminises the masculine sphere of action, represented by the allusions to *Rear Window*, namely to Hitchcock (as director and 'composer'), to the male songwriter, to the male voyeur, and to the male perpetrators of violence. The outfit of the man who attempts to sexually assault Miss Lonely-Hearts is reflected by the male dancer in *Trois Strophes*, when he suddenly appears in a similar shirt and tie [10:09]. In another instance, the male dancer fleetingly embodies the aggression of Thorwald, when he violently shoves a woman out of the way before continuing to gaze at the cellist, who plays with her back to him, absorbed in the sound of her instrument and battling with the fingerboard amid a flurry of pizzicato [2:46]. Akerman's simulation of Hitchcock's hazy critique of phallic virility

(channelled through the scopic drive) and male violence against women, a key theme in *Rear Window*, strips the male figures of the power they had and transforms the female figures from victims into active agents and creators. The cellist, in opposition to Miss Lonely-Hearts, is happy in her solitude and is presented as a spectacle to be listened to and non-voyeuristically *seen*. She indulges in a moment of intimacy with the music, rendering the predatory gaze of the distant male onlooker superfluous to the flow of musical desire that binds the spectator and filmmaker to the cellist and her instrument.

On the level of colour and costume, it is primarily around the character of Miss Lonely-Hearts that Akerman's allusions to *Jeanne Dielman* collide with Hitchcock's film. Miss Lonely-Hearts's auburn hair, her pale green dressing-gown and her state of loneliness and anxiety resemble shots of Akerman's middle-aged housewife, Jeanne Dielman, especially when she boils a kettle in her kitchen before dawn, dressed in a pale green dressing-gown. In Akerman's short, one of the female dancers wears a green dressing-gown, while the other styles her hair in front of a mirror, wearing an emerald green dress, reflective of Miss Lonely-Hearts's dress and hairstyle during the scene when she puts on lipstick, prior to picking up the man who will sexually assault her (see Figure 3(a) and 3(b)). Like the title of the song 'Lisa' that steers Miss Lonely-Hearts away from suicide, Hitchcock connects the colour of her clothes in this part of the film to the female protagonist, Lisa, who is seen wearing a light-green skirt and jacket and is also deeply moved by the songwriter's music, thus forming an empathetic (platonic) bond between the two women.

<INSERT FIGURE 3(a) and 3(b) ON THE SAME PAGE>

Figure 3 (a): Behind the back right-hand window, the dancer ties up her hair in front of a mirror (Mallia Films, La Sept, ARCanal, Centre Pompidou).

Figure 3 (b): Miss Lonely-Hearts gets ready for her romantic restaurant date (Universal Pictures).

Tania Modleski's study of the 'woman who looks' in *Rear Window* can help us to better comprehend the gendered components of Hitchcock's film that Akerman brilliantly exploits. Modleski offers a new perspective on Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic critique that focuses on the position of the male hero and his controlling gaze, with whom the spectator is made to identify. For Mulvey, the film is determined by 'the fears and fantasies of the male spectator, who, because of the threat of castration posed by the woman's image, needs to see her fetishized and controlled in the course of the narrative'. However, Modleski's study contests Mulvey's reductive view of Lisa as 'a passive image of visual perfection' through her obsession with fashion and style (1988, 73). Modleski rightly warns that this reading risks 'acquiescing in masculine contempt for female activities' (77), stripping Lisa of the agency she is able to acquire within the trappings of patriarchy, and denying the association between her love of fashion and the powerful expression of feminine desire and female sexual difference that she exerts. Offering a different stance, Modleski highlights the film's attention to a dual perspective, enacted by Jeff *and* Lisa, with Lisa voicing a different viewpoint on the complexity of the other female characters and their relationships with men (80–1). Modleski thus redirects the critical focus away from the film's simplistic exposition of male voyeurism and

towards its more intricate construction of the female spectator, encompassing the film's presentation of female assertiveness, mobility and power, and the circulation of (non-sexual) female desire between women.

This is where the originality of Akerman's *Trois Strophes* shines through, for, her cine-musical vision proposes an important audio-visual variation on Modleski's reading of *Rear Window* that prophesies Lee Edelman's inspired critique of Hitchcock's film, as will become clear in the next section. The partial alignment of the spectator in *Trois Strophes* with the mobile viewpoint and auditory sensitivity of Lisa, and with the director herself, a queer Jewish woman, whose camera is positioned in the same (bedroom) space as the female musician (her real-life companion), reminds us that there is not one, monolithic female spectatorial position.

Modleski's conclusion in her study of the film is important for grasping Akerman's musically queer mistuning and re-visioning of *Rear Window*'s heterosexual dynamics of looking and listening. Whilst the cellist's ravishing blue gown retains a connection to Hitchcock's Lisa, whose love of glamour and style is evident throughout, she is *not* made to dress in masculine drag, as Lisa is at the end of Hitchcock's film, a costume choice that neutralises the threat of sexual difference by transforming her into a mirror image of the male hero. From beginning to end, Wieder-Atherton continues to *speaks her own desire* through her physical appearance and her playing. Conversely, at the end of *Rear Window*, Lisa is 'spoken *by* the male artist – by the musician, whose completed song "Lisa" plays on the soundtrack ("men have named you," indeed), and ultimately by Hitchcock himself', before finally picking up her own magazine, once Jeff has fallen asleep and has taken his eyes off her (Modleski 1988, 84–5). Modleski notes that the film does, nonetheless, give Lisa the last look, displacing the power of the (white) male gaze: 'We are left with the suspicion [...] that while men sleep and dream their dreams of omnipotence over a safely reduced world, women are not where they appear to be, locked into male "views" of them, imprisoned in their master's dollshouse' (85). Akerman harnesses Hitchcock's construction of the mobile feminine subject who looks and listens to the world around her, and extends it to include the oft-overlooked woman who actively sees and desires other women, a desire that in this instance is explicitly mediated by sound and hearing.

In *Trois Strophes*, the dancers are only superficially imprisoned in their *mistress's* dollshouse, locked into the programmed gestures they are asked to perform. The references to *Rear Window* are politicised and are made to signify along feminist lines, because they are fused with the calculated gestural language of Jeanne Dielman, whose survival is tied to her rigid routine of housework. Akerman, in her guise as mistress of the dolls-house in *Trois Strophes*, gently releases the women from the phallic regime and from the clutches of male power. She prises the gestures of the female dancers away from their predetermined fate by allowing them, and the characters they evoke (Miss Lonely-Hearts, Jeanne Dielman and more indirectly, Akerman's mother), to coincide with, and gain mutual strength from, the relationality and materiality of music, as defined by Wieder-Atherton's self-determined bodily movements. The performative background masquerade is not determined merely by its resistance to masculine forms of superiority, as if to simply pay tribute to Hitchcock's critique of the heterosexual male voyeur. Rather, Akerman's choreography critically appropriates and subverts *Rear Window*'s reflexive gender politics of viewing, queerly resignifying the empathetic female bond arising from the act of listening to music (a bond linking Lisa to Miss Lonely-Hearts to Jeanne Dielman). Consequently, Akerman's short film performatively

honours 'sexual difference as feminine specificity rather than as negative lack vis-à-vis the masculine' (Pollock 2013, 24), but there is an added twist.

Pollock suggests that Akerman's cinema generates a 'prolonged, durational, often incomplete and sometimes stymied staging of the time-space for a necessary *fascinace*', a concept proposed by Bracha Ettinger to capture the aesthetic event in the Freudian case study 'Dora', between the girl-child 'Dora' and Raphael's painting *The Sistine Madonna* (2013, 342). This encounter is non-Oedipal, non-castrative and involves 'a prolonged contemplation of the meaning of a sexual difference "from the feminine" that is not the effect of castrative, hence phallic Oedipalisation' (2010, 24) but arises from the matrixial feminine. When recalling the ghosts of female characters awakened in *Trois Strophes*, the spectator, whose position partially compares to that of Lisa, could be said to echo the (non-sexual) gaze of fascinace of the girl-child, Dora, which is 'addressed to an-other-m/other-woman' (via the evocations of Jeanne Dielman and Miss Lonely-Hearts). However, in *Trois Strophes* this gaze is immersed in the intermediary spectacle and sound of Wieder-Atherton's performance, which is captured sensually by Akerman's camera in ways that energise the presence of lesbian desire that flows with the music between cellist, filmmaker and spectator.

This is particularly evident when Wieder-Atherton begins the second stanza of Dutilleux's score, and the camera lingers over a blurry, enigmatic close-up of a shadowy window, suggestive of emotion beyond words and desire beyond binary oppositions, indicative of the sonic challenge posed by the film to the dictates of the phallic regime (see Figure 4(a)). This ambiguous image also points to music's ability to signify cultural messages that surpass pure musical analysis, while also rendering an idea of sensorial excess that transports spectators into a zone of bodily feeling, immersing them in the gendered physicality of the cellist's playing. The spectator temporarily loses their bearings and they slip into the depths of a non-optical musical dialogue that blends musical sound with female pleasure, functioning outside the confines of the masculine imaginary. The shot is reflective of Akerman's proclivity towards 'the erotic ambiguity of the auditive', as Brandon LaBelle puts it, referring to 'that which is always already unfixed', and which 'lends support to the marginal and the peripheral, and to the emergent' (2014, 118).

<INSERT FIGURE 4(a) and 4(b) ON THE SAME PAGE>

Figure 4 (a): A blurry shot of the dark window marks the start of the second 'stanza' of Dutilleux's *Trois Strophes* (Mallia Films, La Sept, ARCanal, Centre Pompidou).

Figure 4 (b): Sonia Wieder-Atherton in a wordless dialogue with the music, bathed in blue-black light (Mallia Films, La Sept, ARCanal, Centre Pompidou).

The camera pans slowly to the right until the cellist comes into view, with the light seductively illuminating the curves of her shoulder blades (see Figure 4(b)). I want to suggest that this extended sequence envisages the later passionate close-up and long take of Michèle during the culminating party sequence in *Portait d'une jeune fille*, to which I referred earlier, when Akerman's camera tenderly captures Michèle's pained expression upon seeing her female love-interest fall into the arms of another boy. The smouldering charge of desire associated with this shot, as it arises in each film, where each time it is framed by a blurry

backdrop (marking the dissolution of binary dynamics), enables Akerman to set up an unspoken, by which I mean musical, cinematic correspondence between two scenes marked by lesbian desire.

Significantly, Wieder-Atherton's status as a real-life musician, who is temporarily thrust into the limelight, forms an affinity with the fictional songwriter in *Rear Window* who is played by Ross Bagdasarian, the real-life American-Armenian singer-songwriter. The physical resemblance between Wieder-Atherton's short dark hair that glistens blue-black, and the male songwriter's slick black hair, points to a gendered and ethnic otherness common to both figures. Their peripheral status as musicians, whose presence is quite often left unmentioned by critics, aligns with Akerman's singular, outsider position as 'Belgian in Paris, Jewish and the daughter of refugees, a lesbian in the *cinéma d'auteurs*' (White 2008, 415). Furthermore, in *Portrait d'une jeune fille*, which I have linked to the above-mentioned shot of the cellist in *Trois Strophes*, Michèle's stripy top matches the clothing of another boy who is visible in the background, associating Michèle with the masculine position in the conventional boy-girl coupling. This costume choice underlines a deliberate distortion of clear-cut gender binaries, a manoeuvre that echoes Akerman's treatment of Sonia Wieder-Atherton in the short film.

The parallel established between Wieder-Atherton and Michèle is suggestive not only of Akerman's intimate feelings for the cellist, but also of her status as an outsider looking in, who is partially excluded from the cellist's polyamorous dialogue with her androgynous other 'lover', namely, the music emanating from her instrument. These observations bring into focus the deterritorialising force of marginality that pulses through Akerman's rendering of *Rear Window*. For all the reticence and ambiguity that subsists in the aesthetic of her filmmaking practice, Akerman's rendition of *Rear Window* expertly fashions a unique acoustic space for queer spectatorial pleasures that cannot be reduced to the mother-daughter relation, to the heterosexual woman who looks, and nor can they be collapsed into the pleasures of the male heterosexual spectator.

### **Ambivalent spectatorship and a hole that sings**

Forming a parallel with *Saute ma ville*, disorderly domestic space is encapsulated in *Trois Strophes* by the sight of the unmade bed on the left-hand side of the cellist's apartment. The apparitional object of the bed can be construed as a remnant of the lesbian sex scene in *Je tu il elle* that is now emptied of human life. It signifies the embrace of mess, confusion and stasis that symbolically reduces reproductive futurity to a mass of crumpled sheets (see Figure 5). Heightened by its stillness and silence, the sight of the unmade bed in the cellist's [bed]room conjures up a sonic memory of the 'amplified rustling of sheets' and the visceral charge of 'two intertwined bodies wrestling' (Murray 2016, 50) during the lengthy encounter between Julie and her lover. Although the bed in *Trois Strophes* functions as a lifeless residue from this 11-minute long take, which is almost as long as the short film itself, Akerman's 'queer choreography' (51) in her earlier feature, analysed astutely by Ros Murray, that subverts heterosexual norms of pornography and eroticism, colours our understanding of her pastiche of *Rear Window* that privileges the female artist as creator, performer and listener, and constructs a form of female affective connection and queer spectatorship that is not dependent on masculine fantasy.

<INSERT FIGURE 5>

Figure 5: The pink bed sheets of the unmade bed are evocative of *Je tu il elle*. The yellow tiles behind the back left-hand window are reminiscent of those in Jeanne Dielman's kitchen (Mallia Films, La Sept, ARCanal, Centre Pompidou).

What is equally crucial in *Trois Strophes* is that the thick red curtains, the empty red chair that is spotlighted by an overhanging light, and the light pink bedsheets, also bring to mind the saturated red screen at the end of *Rear Window*, when Jeffries, positioned in his wheelchair, uses his camera to blind Thorwald with the dazzling light of the flash. Evoking Thorwald's disoriented vision, I believe Akerman's *mise-en-scène* is suffused with a form of anal desire, staged via the female body and figure, that makes space for new theoretical considerations of the neglected sexual politics of female anal eroticism.<sup>12</sup> In his virtuosic reading of male eroticism in *Rear Window*, Lee Edelman exposes the film's irrepressible musical pulse of anality that, he argues, structures the entire film.<sup>13</sup> Commenting on the blood-red hole that 'bleeds across the whole screen' in this climactic scene at the end of the film, Edelman claims that the red hole 'gives visible form to the formlessness of the anal cut or opening', and out of this cut 'the Symbolic order of visual relations emerges as the law of form' (1999, 86–9). Akerman's perverse 'rear window' view in *Trois Strophes*, in which the hauntings of *Jeanne Dielman* dwell, is uncannily powerful when construed in terms of the non-binary rhythms of anal eroticism, linked subtly but specifically to the female body and lesbian desire.

The embedded screen (the visible 'behind'), framing the cellist's performance, marks 'the determining otherness' within vision that Edelman suggests 'threatens to make us thereafter see double' (1999, 86). This is an otherness reinforced in *Trois Strophes* through Akerman's privileging of a non-phallic erotics of sound over the 'razor-sharp optic of a Symbolic vision' (72). The 'glasshole' in Akerman's film reveals a hallucinatory vision of otherness in the form of the dancer's fleeting simulation of Jeanne's castrative act of stabbing her client in the neck (a phallic symbol) (refer to Figure 1). This internal otherness within vision spills over the edges of the frame, since it becomes apparent that the redness of Jeanne's bloodied hands has soaked through the *mise-en-scène*, permanently staining *Trois Strophes*'s bedsheets pink, loaded with the memory of *Je tu il elle* and its ambiguous depiction of lesbian desire. Indeed, *Trois Strophes* is tinged with the impure traces of 'a deep-seated ambivalence toward the logic of clear-cut distinctions' (82), as Edelman writes of the anal pulsion in *Rear Window*.

The ghostly presence of *Jeanne Dielman* is doubled by the 'haunting awareness of the anal hole' that disturbs binary logic and the lucidity of castration (Edelman 1999, 90). If the anus constitutes a nonprocreative hole, it is also, as Edelman affirms, 'the hole from which – around which, against which, Symbolic reality takes shape, establishing the empire of genital difference precisely in order to fill it' (79), and thus rendering the hole non-threatening through its concealment. In an interview on the short, Wieder-Atherton (2016) reveals how Akerman was intent on letting the music be. Instead of tampering with it, she constructed the visual landscape 'around' the music. Like an invisible sound source, concealed behind the screen, that is brutally and dazzlingly exposed, Wieder-Atherton's musical performance could,

rather scandalously, be said to constitute another ‘gaping hole’ (Edelman 1999, 92), within the hole of Akerman’s lens, that signals the end of vision thanks to her instrument’s untamed and unframeable sound.

Akerman keeps our attention fixed on the *unseen* of the visual realm by illuminating, through the objectless nature of musical sound, the silence – all that is unheard – within the visual field. The silent rhythms of male anality that Hitchcock’s film subconsciously presents are mobilised, regendered and rendered audible by the cries and whispers of the cello’s voice. This opaque voice, in the name of Akerman’s lesbian minor cinema, disrupts the merciless heterosexualizing system of the Symbolic’s favoured ocular realm, and offers an alternative form of ambivalent spectatorship that embraces the musically queer.

## Conclusion

*Trois Strophes*’s queer mistuning and revisioning of Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* aligns the cellist with filmic traces of Akerman’s life before they met, by way of the ghostly gestural memories of *Jeanne Dielman*, and the related expression of a latent maternal bond. However, at the same time, she is made to co-vibrate with an expansive, circuitous flow of queer desire, that awkwardly brings into the same frame Jeanne’s choreographed gestures and the visual signs of a younger Akerman performing a transgressive *disordering* of domestic space and heteronormative desires (*Saute ma ville* via *Je tu il elle* and the unmade bed).

Wieder-Atherton is not presented as the rescuer of other women and the women are not rescued by other men. She might be stationary, but she is in constant motion through her active listening and playing, thereby resisting the stasis and objectification of fetishism associated with masculine spectatorial pleasures. She speaks and names the male artists she cites (Dutilleux, Sacher, Bartók), and is happily and vulnerably spoken *by* Akerman, her co-creator and lesbian partner, finding a friend in the marginal status of cinema’s neglected sonic other (the soundtrack), and together they seek a listener.

Through aural and visual means, my analysis has demonstrated how Akerman slowly but surely, through sound and image, queers the scopoc regime by validating the non-heterosexual desires of the female spectator, and by presenting the female protagonist — Sonia Wieder-Atherton — not as a fetishised object of the male gaze but as deviantly engrossed, as an active and passive participant, in the intimacy of her dialogue with the music. The gendered materiality and sexual potentiality of her musical performance comes to mediate the simulated voyeuristic encounter that Akerman establishes between the spectator and the cellist’s distant ‘behind’. In doing so, Akerman stabs the phallocentric scopoc regime in the back and frees the ambivalent pulse of a sonic erotics, conducive to Akerman’s lesbian minor cinema. *Trois Strophes* allows the sonic life of Akerman’s cinema, which is energised and sustained by the force of Sonia Wieder-Atherton’s audible, visible and pivotal musical presence, to bubble up through the cracks of critical discourse. The film presents us with a hitherto unheard perspective of a Jewish lesbian filmmaker who sees through the ears of her body, as she responds with her camera to the wordless rhythm and wild harmonies of her partner’s musical voice.



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## Contributor details

Albertine Fox's research is concerned with listening spaces in contemporary French and Francophone documentaries, with a focus on the documentary convention of the filmed interview. As part of this project, she has recently completed an interview with the Lebanese filmmaker Corine Shawi. Albertine has published the chapter 'Vocal Landscapes: Framing Mutable Stories in *De l'autre côté* (2002) and *Une voix dans le désert* (2002)' in Marion Schmid and Emma Wilson (eds), *Chantal Akerman: Afterlives* (Legenda 2019), and her article 'Sensory Experience, Sound and Queerness in Chantal Akerman's *Maniac Shadows* (2013)' was published in September 2019 in *MIRAJ* 8 (1&2). Albertine's first monograph *Godard and Sound: Acoustic Innovation in the Late Films of Jean-Luc Godard* was published in 2017 by I.B.Tauris.

## Filmography

*À l'Est avec Sonia Wieder-Atherton*, 2009, C. Akerman, France.

*Autour de "Jeanne Dielman"*, 1975, S. Frey, France/Belgium.

*Avec Sonia-Wieder Atherton*, 2002, C. Akerman, France.

*Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman*, 1997, C. Akerman, France.

*D'Est*, 1993, C. Akerman, Belgium/France/Portugal.

*De l'autre côté*, 2002, C. Akerman, France/Belgium/Australia/Finland.

*Demain on déménage*, 2004, C. Akerman, France.

*Golden Eighties*, 1986, C. Akerman, France/Belgium.

*Histoires d'Amériques: Food, Family and Philosophy*, 1988, C. Akerman, Belgium/France/USA.

*I Don't Belong Anywhere: Le cinéma de Chantal Akerman*, 2015, M. Lambert, Belgium.

*Je tu il elle*, 1974, C. Akerman, Belgium/France.

*Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, 1975, C. Akerman, Belgium.

*La Captive*, 2000, C. Akerman, France/Belgium.

*Les Années 80*, 1983, C. Akerman, France/Belgium.

*Letters Home*, 1986, C. Akerman, France.

*Nuit et jour*, 2005, C. Akerman, France/Belgium/Switzerland.

*Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles*, 1993, C. Akerman, France. Made for the French television series *Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge*.

*Portrait d'une paresseuse*, 1986, C. Akerman, France, Germany. Segment of *Seven Women, Seven Sins*, made for German television.

*Rear Window*, 1954, A. Hitchcock, USA.

*Rue Mallet-Stevens*, 1986, C. Akerman, France.

*Saute ma ville*, 1968, C. Akerman, Belgium.

*Trois Strophes sur le nom de Sacher*, 1989, C. Akerman, France.

*Un divan à New York*, 1996, C. Akerman, France/Germany/Belgium.

*Un jour Pina a demandé*, 1983, C. Akerman, France.

### **Multimedia works**

*D'Est en musique*, 2005, S. Wieder-Atherton, with images from *D'Est* (C. Akerman), France.

*D'Est: au bord de la fiction*, 1995, C. Akerman, video installation in two parts, based on *D'Est* (C. Akerman).

*Maniac Shadows*, 2013, C. Akerman, two-room installation, 3 channel video triptych/96 photographs/soundtrack.

*Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide*, 2004, C. Akerman, video installation in two parts.

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<sup>1</sup> Born in San Francisco, Wieder-Atherton grew up in New York and moved with her family to France in 1968. In Paris, she studied with the French cellist Maurice Gendron and the pianist Jean Hubeau, before moving to Moscow at the age of nineteen to train with the Russian cellist Natalia Shakhovskaya.

<sup>2</sup> In one arresting sequence in Akerman's portrait essay film, co-produced by ARTE, entitled *Avec Sonia Wieder-Atherton/With Sonia Wieder-Atherton* (2002), a female cellist (Sarah Iancu) is filmed from behind a gauze-like fabric as she co-performs Monteverdi's 'Duo Seraphim' with Wieder-Atherton and a male cellist (Matthieu Lejeune). This atmospheric image appears to foresee the transparent tulle scrim that will appear in front of the large video projection of Akerman and her mother in the later installation *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide*, on which an image of handwritten text appears, as well as a portrait of a young woman, suggestive of Akerman's grandmother's diary that contained her private thoughts and a watercolour portrait of a woman (Pollock 2013, 333).

<sup>3</sup> Ioana Wieder was a Romanian Jew from Bucharest, whose family left Romania and moved to Palestine, then to Lebanon, where they remained during the war. She later gained citizenship in France in 1957 before relocating to the US. She was a translator, teacher, filmmaker and militant feminist, and she founded the collective Les Insoumuses with Carole Roussopoulos and Delphine Seyrig in 1975. They went on to establish the Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir in 1982 and Wieder became the President of the Centre after Seyrig's death in 1990, until 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Akerman's *Letters Home* is based on Françoise Merle's stage play *Letters Home* (1984), starring Seyrig and her niece Coralie Seyrig who star in Akerman's film version. The play revolves around letters sent from Sylvia Plath to her mother, who published the correspondence in 1975 after Plath's suicide.

<sup>5</sup> An extract from the ending of this short film is accessible via Sonia Wieder-Atherton's official website: <http://www.soniawiederatherton.com/en/images/> [accessed 04 November 2019].

<sup>6</sup> As a brief aside, it should be noted that in *Avec Sonia Wieder-Atherton*, the closing credits reveal that the film was shot in the opulent Château de Ferrières in France that was built in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century for Baron James de Rothschild. The Château was used by the French Jewish humanitarian organisation 'Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants' (Children's Aid Society) that accommodated Jewish orphans after the Second World War. The OSE Photograph Collection 1937–1962 contains a photograph of a summer camp, held for Jewish orphans in 1945, in the grounds of this Château. It is accessible online at: <http://digifindingaids.cjh.org/?pID=2130079#a14>. These sorts of clues that Akerman drops into her films are essential to our understanding of the incorporation of the historical narrative of Jewishness into what I consider to be, in this particular film, a narrational act of love, performed by a queer Jewish director.

<sup>7</sup> Hitchcock famously described *Rear Window* as his 'most cinematic film', representative of the 'purest form of cinema', defined by the visual logic of montage (1972, 40).

<sup>8</sup> 'Imagine you come home from an evening out, you don't get changed, you just hang up your coat and play, as though the party was still going on in your imagination' (translation by Alan Fell).

<sup>9</sup> *Trois Strophes* was made after Akerman's documentary on the choreographer Pina Bausch, entitled «*Un jour Pina a demandé...*»/One Day Pina Asked Me (1983), hinting at further possible connections between the short and this earlier documentary.

<sup>10</sup> A haunting background presence of past trauma has also been noted by Wieder-Atherton in relation to her own mother's early experiences. Discussing her fascination for the singing of cantors and the spiritual power of Chasidic music, which she discovered when Akerman asked her to research Jewish liturgical music for *Histoires*

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*d'Amériques*, Wieder-Atherton explains that this work intensified her awareness of aspects of her mother's unspoken traumatic past: 'This was something that existed in the background to my life, but I knew nothing more about it'. When working on *Histoires d'Amériques*, she experienced a moment of revelation, as 'suddenly it seemed so natural, as if I knew those melodies, as if those sounds had been there for ages. It was a very strong, strange, even frightening impression – something you know so well, yet you have never met it before' (Duchen 2011). The discoveries Wieder-Atherton made about her mother's past, and about her maternal grandmother, caused her to add 'Wieder' (her grandparents' name) to her surname, to deepen her connection with them (Percival 2019, 209).

<sup>11</sup> This hair-brushing gesture is singled out in Sami Frey's sixty-nine-minute documentary *Autour de "Jeanne Dielman"*, edited by Agnès Ravez and Chantal Akerman. This film was made during the shooting of *Jeanne Dielman* and features Akerman, Seyrig and the crew. In one amusingly tense exchange on set, Seyrig struggles to achieve the slow pace Akerman requires of her as she brushes her hair. In her frustration, she orders Akerman to explain the psychology behind the gesture and Akerman eventually but reluctantly complies: 'She's not daydreaming. It's a moment of relaxation for herself alone'.

<sup>12</sup> In *Tendencies*, Eve Sedgwick highlights some significant asymmetries between discourses of male and female anal eroticism, underlining the decisive absence of a discourse of female anality: 'Since classical times, *there has been no important and sustained Western discourse in which women's anal eroticism means*' (1993, 204, original emphasis). Sedgwick suggests that female anality (when presented as a pleasure and not a punishment) lacks 'the representative relation to lesbianism that male anality has to male homosexuality' (204). Whilst Akerman's suggestive staging of female anal eroticism that I have identified in *Trois Strophes* functions non-explicitly, it paves the way for a richer critical dialogue to take place on unacknowledged sites of queer female pleasure.

<sup>13</sup> Hitchcock specifically referred to the musicality of the cutting rhythm in *Rear Window*, stating that 'each cut was written ahead of time'. He compares the process of deciding where the cuts should fall, in advance of the shoot, to composing a piece of music (1972, 41). His comments inadvertently give form to the idea that underlying his conception of montage as 'the purest form of cinema' is the impurity of an inherent [-ly queer] musicality.